

Enhancing communication skills for integrating spiritual and religious elements in marriage and family counseling in Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

Communication is essential in the counseling process, particularly in family counseling, where effective communication occurs when information is understood and accepted. This qualitative case study examines how counselors integrate spiritual and religious elements into family counseling through their communication patterns. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 counselors, and data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software through thematic analysis. The findings reveal six key themes: counselors' sensitivity to clients' spiritual and religious concerns, alignment with clients' perspectives, identification of spiritual and religious themes in clients' behavior and language, assertiveness in assessing religious issues, use of humor in discussing religious matters, and seeking clients' permission to address spiritual topics. The study highlights the influence of Malay cultural norms, as well as counselors' personal beliefs and values, on their communication styles, which emphasize politeness and refinement. These findings underscore the need for further research on counseling communication across cultural contexts in Malaysia to enhance professional competencies and contribute to the development of the counseling field.

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1. Introduction

Family counseling is an intervention process conducted by professional counselors with family members as a group to help them address the issues they face. This process aims for the entire family system (Jiménez et al., 2019). During family counseling, each family member can express their dissatisfaction and the challenges they face (Noh and Choi, 2020). They are then guided in adapting their interaction patterns and family dynamics to restore functionality (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2004). In Islamic society, the family institution plays a crucial role and is a priority in maintaining relationships, such as between parents and children, as well as among siblings (Othman, 2014). Carlson et al. (2002) emphasized the significant role of spirituality and religion in daily life, highlighting a strong connection between these aspects and family counseling.

Additionally, contemporary society increasingly turns to religious solutions to ease life's burdens. Recognizing this trend advocates for integrating spirituality and religion into family counseling practices to help build and reshape family functionality, parenting styles, dynamics, and bonds.

A counselor must employ various language-based strategies during sessions to address each client's unique situation effectively. This helps the counselor and client adapt to the circumstances, speeding up the counseling process. Language is the most vital tool in facilitating the resolution of a wide range of issues and achieving solutions. How counselors use language is crucial in this regard (Osman and Wahab, 2018). During counseling sessions, counselors incorporate specific methods and techniques guided by religious and spiritual sources to integrate spirituality and religion. This approach influences the counselor's understanding of the client and how the sessions are conducted. These methods blend spiritual and religious practices into the therapeutic process while respecting established theories. As such, the inclusion of spiritual and religious elements is considered one component of the counseling process, on par with other aspects such as the client's physical, social, and emotional well-being (Tan, 1996). In family counseling, communication

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occurs between the counselor and the clients (family members) involved. When integrating spiritual and religious approaches, communication is critical to the effectiveness of the counseling process. Sulaiman (2003) emphasized that communication is a significant aspect of counseling. In this process, communication occurs between the counselor and the client, with information being exchanged both verbally and non-through speech. Effective communication in counseling involves a mutual understanding of shared meanings between the counselor and the client (Mangan et al., 2022). Salhah (2017) identified five elements that shape communication and action: i) verbal communication (messages conveyed through words), ii) vocal communication (messages conveyed through intonation, tone, and emphasis), iii) body language (eye contact, facial expressions, posture, and hand movements), iv) communication through touch (areas touched, style of touch), and v) communicative actions. The primary purpose of communication is to create continuous and dynamic exchanges that alter or share knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors in line with values and interests across various aspects of interaction. Thus, the goal of communication aligns with the objectives of helping relationships in the counseling interaction between the counselor and the client.

When integrating spiritual and religious elements into counseling, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) (Cashwell and Watts, 2010.) has identified three key communication competencies for counselors: i) counselors should be able to respond with acceptance and sensitivity to clients' spiritual and religious issues during communication, ii) counselors should use spiritual and religious concepts that align with the client's perspectives and are acceptable to them, and iii) counselors should be able to identify spiritual and religious themes in client communication and address them therapeutically when necessary (Curry and Simpson, 2011). Additionally, cultural factors significantly influence the effectiveness of communication between the counselor and the client. Counselors must understand how their culture affects them and respect other cultures' values. This awareness allows counselors to be sensitive to the unique differences that arise from social class, ethnicity, and gender (Yusoff, 2016).

Rafidah and Noh (2014) discussed that culture encompasses various aspects, including ethnography (ethnicity, nationality, religion, and language), demographics (age, gender, and location), status (socioeconomic and educational backgrounds), as well as official and unofficial memberships and affiliations. Therefore, counselors' sensitivity to cultural diversity involves understanding their culture. This enables them to comprehend and appreciate the cultural diversity associated with the similarities and differences in specific cultures. In Malay society, politeness is highly valued in interpersonal communication. Language politeness

is the use of courteous and refined language during interactions (Osman and Wahab, 2018). This practice is not only esteemed by society (Osman and Wahab, 2018) but is also a religious obligation.

Salleh and Affendi (2007) examined the factors that influence communication and interactions among the Malay people. Their research found that Malays generally avoid being direct in their communication. Instead, they prefer to use effective and polite verbal or non-verbal language to convey their messages. This careful approach to speech and behavior is deeply rooted in the long-standing cultural perceptions of the Malay community. In Malay communication, politeness emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmony in relationships. Maros's (2011) study found that Malays find it challenging to offer criticism, a difficulty reflected not only in brief turn-taking but also in frequent and relatively long pauses (sometimes exceeding one minute). This suggests that providing criticism is a complex pragmatic linguistic process shaped by cultural values and the internal factors that influence behavior.

2. Methodology

This section provides a concise overview of the procedures and methods used in the investigation, including the research design, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

2.1. Research design

This study explored the communication patterns counselors use when integrating spirituality and religion into family counseling practices in Malaysia. A qualitative case study research design was adopted as the methodology. Yin (2014) suggested that a case study approach is ideal for investigating a specific phenomenon, as well as its underlying reasons and mechanisms. Flick (2009) explained that case studies involve gathering data on an individual, organization, or situation where unexpected or ambiguous behaviors are closely examined to gain deeper insight or reconsider the case.

This case study investigates the communication patterns and skills used in family and marriage counseling, focusing on how and why practitioners incorporate prayer into their interventions (Liamputtong, 2014). The design was chosen based on Yazan's (2015) assertion that case studies are crucial for obtaining detailed information and uncovering new insights. A qualitative case study approach was employed to explore the communication techniques used to integrate spiritual and religious practices in family and marriage counseling in Malaysia (Yusmini, 2011; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

This qualitative study establishes reliability and validity through reflexivity, peer review, member checking, and triangulation, aligning with Guba's

(1981) framework for evaluating qualitative research quality: Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking was conducted by sharing the findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and ensure that their perspectives were faithfully represented. To strengthen the study's credibility, triangulation was employed by cross-verifying data from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and document analysis (Creswell, 2014).

Reflexivity played a central role in addressing potential researcher bias, encouraging the researcher to critically examine how personal backgrounds, beliefs, cultures, and experiences might influence data interpretation (Yin, 2014). Additionally, peer review was conducted to provide an external perspective, ensuring that the analysis and conclusions were unbiased and grounded in the data. Reliability, in this context, refers to the consistency of the study's findings and their replicability across different settings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

Credibility is how well the research methods accurately describe the thing being studied (Morrow, 2005), and transferability is how well the results can be used in different situations, like generalization in quantitative research (Shenton, 2004). Together, these efforts ensure the integrity of the data by minimizing bias and strengthening trustworthiness. The robustness of the methodology is further enhanced through expert review and the comprehensive application of reflexivity and triangulation (Shenton, 2004; Morrow, 2005).

2.2. Research Participants

Participants were selected using purposive non-probability sampling. Potential participants were drawn from three government agencies providing family and marriage counseling services: the Department of Social Welfare, the National Population and Family Development Agency, and the State Islamic Religious Council. The researchers contacted the desk officers of these agencies by phone to obtain authorization letters. They then explained the study's objectives and requested permission to access the sites for participant interviews. The following criteria were established for participant selection:

1. A registered counselor by the Malaysian Board of Counselors and holding a valid practice certification;
2. Currently working as a Psychology Officer;
3. Have at least five years of experience in practicing family and marriage and;
4. Only among Muslim counselors.

The study involved 13 counselors, including three men and ten women, all Malay Muslim counselors working at three counseling centers that provide family counseling services (Table 1). The

participants were between 32 and 46 years old and had 8 to 18 years of experience in counseling. They were informed about the research process, objectives, and procedures, and their participation was voluntary.

The 13 participants selected signed a consent form expressing their voluntary participation in the study. The researcher developed interview protocols based on the guidelines outlined by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling in 2009 (Cashwell and Watts, 2010), focusing on counselor competence in integrating spirituality and religion into counseling. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, recorded using two backup devices while the researchers noted each interviewee's narratives and impressions. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed using NVIVO version 12 software through thematic analysis.

Table 1: Participants characteristics

Participant	Gender	Years of family counseling experience	Age
P1	Male	18	46
P2	Female	12	41
P3	Male	16	45
P4	Female	11	39
P5	Male	12	38
P6	Female	12	39
P7	Female	15	41
P8	Female	11	36
P9	Female	8	32
P10	Female	9	33
P11	Female	8	32
P12	Female	14	40
P13	Female	16	38

3. Results and discussion

The data analysis revealed six key themes in the communication patterns of counselors integrating spirituality and religion into family counseling practices. These are the themes:

1. Counselors acknowledge and are sensitive to clients' spiritual and religious issues;
2. Counselors align their communication with clients' spiritual and religious perspectives;
3. When assessing religious cases, counselors communicate assertively;
4. Counselors employ comedy while addressing religious topics and;
5. Counselors seek permission before addressing spiritual and religious issues.

3.1. Counselors acknowledge and are sensitive to clients' spiritual and religious issues

Counselors integrate spiritual and religious approaches when they perceive that clients are ready and open to discussing these aspects. It is easier for counselors to engage in such discussions when clients are willing and receptive. This indicates that counselors are prepared to address spiritual and religious issues in counseling when clients show openness to these topics (Curry and Simpson, 2011).

A participant in the study, P1, explained this perspective: "Introducing these matters to the client depends on their readiness. When clients are open to exploring their spirituality, it is easier to integrate these values into our sessions. However, if a client is not ready or has not expressed interest in their spiritual side, I allow them time to understand what I mean." P1 further emphasized that a counselor's sensitivity to a client's willingness to discuss spiritual and religious topics provides an opportunity to help clients explore their spiritual values and understand religious aspects relevant to their situation. In this context, acceptance is essential for building a reciprocal relationship between the counselor and the client. This mutual acceptance creates a two-way influence, where the counselor acknowledges the client's spiritual and religious concerns, and in turn, the client becomes more open to the counselor's reflections and interpretations. This exchange allows for a deeper exploration of the client's spiritual and religious concerns. P1 added, "When the client opens up, I take that opportunity to help them explore their spiritual world and understand the religious context of their issues. If I see meaningful insights from the client's perspective, I build on that. When there is a connection between the counselor and the client, it reflects mutual acceptance."

Counselors also show openness to clients discussing religious matters, even when their beliefs differ from the client's. They practice unconditional acceptance, regardless of ethnicity or religion (Mangan et al., 2022). P2 shared an experience with a female client of Indian ethnicity and Hindu faith, who initially sought counseling for marital issues. During the sessions, it became clear that the client's marital difficulties were linked to religious concerns. The counselor's openness demonstrated a willingness to accept and address these issues. P2 described, "I accepted the client, who was of Indian ethnicity and had religious concerns related to her marriage. She mentioned that her husband criticized her for going to the temple, and she wanted to remain a committed Hindu despite these difficulties. Although her beliefs were different from mine, I accepted her unconditionally. I listened to her concerns about her marriage and helped her navigate the difficulties she faced with her husband."

When addressing spiritual and religious matters, counselors take a careful approach by being sensitive to the client's needs and level of comfort. They assess a client's readiness for these discussions through their appearance, behavior, and communication. Establishing trust early in the counseling process helps create a safe environment where clients feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues. Counselors believe that building a strong rapport facilitates the counseling process and fosters trust in ongoing discussions. P4 explained, "When discussing sensitive topics like religion, we must assess whether the client is ready for such discussions. If the client is not prepared to engage with religious values, we should wait. However, once

trust is established, we can gradually introduce questions related to these sensitive topics."

Counselors also adjust their communication to align with the client's spiritual and religious perspectives. They recognize the importance of using simple language to accommodate the client's level of education and understanding. By avoiding complex or technical terms, counselors ensure that their messages are clear and easily understood, reducing the risk of confusion. P4 stated, "I use straightforward language because I recognize that some clients may not be highly educated. Using complex terms might confuse them, so I choose words that are easier to understand."

P4's approach is supported by P8, who explained that she integrates spiritual and religious elements based on the client's level of knowledge and understanding (Curry and Simpson, 2011). Counselors also assign tasks that align with the client's familiarity with religious practices, as determined during the initial assessment. P8 noted, "Incorporating spiritual elements depends on the client's level of religious understanding. For example, if a client lacks basic religious knowledge, I would not assign them tasks such as performing special prayers or reading Yasin. Instead, I start with basic practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God) and istighfar (seeking forgiveness), based on the client's level of engagement."

P9 further elaborated that she selects religious practices that match the client's level of acceptance. She provided an example, explaining that assigning voluntary prayers to a client who does not perform obligatory prayers would not be appropriate: "If a client has limited religious knowledge, we should use practices that are easy for them to understand. For instance, I stick to basic practices and would not ask someone who does not perform obligatory prayers to do voluntary prayers like tahajjud (night prayer). Requesting additional voluntary practices would not make sense if they are not observing the fundamental ones."

Similarly, P5 emphasized adapting communication to match the client's social and educational background. She explained that she maintains a professional approach for clients in professional settings but adjusts her style for those from rural areas. However, she stressed that religious aspects remain central, as most of her clients are Muslim. P5 stated, "It depends on the client's background. For professionals, I maintain a professional approach. For older clients or those from rural areas, I adapt my style to suit their communication preferences. In our society, most clients are Muslim, and they are generally open about religious matters."

3.2. Counselors align their communication with clients' spiritual and religious perspectives

Communication consists of both verbal and non-verbal elements. Verbal communication involves spoken words, while non-verbal communication

includes facial expressions, body language, and gestures (Salhah, 2017). Several studies emphasize the importance of communication skills in addressing spiritual and religious concerns. Pargament et al. (1998) highlighted the role of spiritual competence in helping clients with existential concerns. Similarly, Corey (2013) stressed the importance of empathy and active listening in effective counseling, particularly when working across cultural and religious differences. These findings align with our study, which suggests that effective communication—based on cultural sensitivity and mutual respect—is essential for incorporating spiritual elements into counseling practices in Malaysia.

P2 explains that she identifies clients' spiritual and religious concerns by observing their behavior. For instance, clients who appear shy or hesitant to discuss spiritual topics may be struggling with these issues, whereas those who are more open and direct provide clearer insights. She states, "If clients are shy or hesitant to talk, or if they are open and direct, we can understand their spiritual and religious concerns through their behavior. For example, observing their religious practices at home can provide important clues."

P8 adds that she detects spiritual and religious themes during the exploration process and by observing clients' appearance. A client's narrative about their spiritual life can reveal their beliefs and practices, while their attire may offer additional insights into their religious background. However, counselors strive to remain neutral and avoid making assumptions based on appearance. P8 explains, "We usually identify spiritual themes during the exploration process, especially when clients discuss spiritual aspects in response to open-ended questions. For example, if a client does not wear a headscarf, it might indicate a different level of religious practice, though we do not judge them. On the other hand, clients who wear headscarves and speak about their religious practices give us insight into their spirituality. This helps us decide whether and how to introduce spirituality into our sessions."

In addition to non-verbal communication, counselors also identify spiritual and religious themes through clients' verbal expressions, particularly the words and phrases they use during sessions. P1 describes her approach to recognizing spiritual and religious concerns by paying attention to clients' language. For example, when a client mentions "God," it signals a willingness to discuss deeper spiritual themes. She shares, "When a client says something like, 'It's true when you mentioned what is happening, there is something that God wants us to understand,' it indicates that they are opening up about their spiritual perspective."

P3 also identifies spiritual and religious themes through specific phrases, such as "after I die, I don't want my children to fight," or by using the word wasiat (will). Such expressions suggest that the client is thinking about religious concepts related to death and the afterlife. Similarly, the term wasiat

implies that the client wants to leave their children a final message or guidance. P3 explains, "When a client says, 'I don't want my children to fight after I die,' it indicates that they are introducing religious elements. This suggests that they understand these issues, making it appropriate to incorporate religious discussions. Mentioning a will (wasiat) is also relevant in this context."

P6 further observes spiritual and religious themes through words such as sembahyang (prayer), bilal (muezzin), and surau (prayer hall). These terms indicate that the client is bringing up religious matters that should be addressed appropriately. She explains, "Clients might say things like, 'My husband prays five times a day; he is even the muezzin—the one who calls to prayer at the mosque.' This shows that the client is open to discussing religious elements in counseling."

P12 shares a similar perspective, noting that clients often express spiritual and religious concerns through specific words, such as sembahyang (prayer). She explains, "Clients come with questions like, 'My husband doesn't pray. How can I encourage my child to pray? How can he guide me?' These questions indicate that they are seeking religious guidance."

3.3. When assessing religious cases, counselors communicate assertively

Counselors use assertive communication when addressing clients' religious concerns. They believe that discussing religious issues directly is important, but they also ensure their approach remains respectful. While counselors may need to address behaviors that are considered sinful or prohibited in religious contexts, they avoid being judgmental or accusatory. Instead, they present these issues in a firm but sensitive manner, maintaining respect in their communication. This approach aligns with the refined manners valued in Islam (Borras et al., 2010).

P1 shared her experience in handling a case involving a divorced couple who continued to behave as if they were still legally married during the waiting period (iddah), despite having no intention of reconciliation. She firmly informed them that their actions were against religious teachings and that they needed to seek repentance. She explained, "If you have no intention of reconciling but continue to act as if you are still married, then something must be done—namely, repentance to Allah."

P10 described a case involving marital conflict, where a wife frequently argued with her husband due to his intense jealousy. The conflict arose from the wife's affectionate behavior toward their adopted teenage son, which made the husband uncomfortable. P10 assertively addressed the issue, stating that the wife's behavior was inappropriate and that the husband's feelings were understandable. She recalled, "The wife said, 'My husband is jealous when my adopted son hugs me or touches me.' I asked her, 'Have you been taking care

of him since he was young?' She responded, 'No, he is 17 now, he is my adopted son.'" P10 then advised her on the importance of setting clear boundaries, explaining, "We need to consider what is appropriate. While he is like a son to you, he is still an individual with desires. Desires do not differentiate between anyone."

P10 further emphasized that the role of a counselor is not to give direct advice but to explore the client's thoughts and behaviors. When clients' actions deviate from religious or social norms, counselors use assertive communication to provide religious guidance while avoiding personal judgment or punishment. Following this, they help clients develop plans for both short-term and long-term improvements. She explained, "In counseling sessions, we do not give direct advice; instead, we aim to understand the client's perspective."

For instance, if a client has committed adultery and is pregnant outside of marriage, counselors explore the client's understanding of the situation from a religious perspective. They help clients recognize the religious implications while focusing on constructive steps for the future. "We discuss what steps the client can take in the short term and long term, acknowledging their past actions while guiding them forward," P10 explained.

P8 shared a similar approach when working with a gay client. Initially, she did not discuss the religious aspect but focused on the client's emotions, behaviors, and physical well-being. After assessing the situation, she introduced the religious perspective in later sessions, helping the client reflect on their behavior without feeling judged. "I once worked with a gay client. In the first session, I did not mention the religious aspect, but the client was already aware that their actions conflicted with religious teachings. I listened to their concerns without judging them. By the second session, I felt it was necessary to introduce the religious perspective to provide a clearer understanding and encourage self-reflection, without making them feel punished."

Counselors also use assertive communication when conveying religious truths (al-haq) to clients. They see it as their responsibility to share these truths in a way that guides clients without being judgmental. P1 explained, "Our goal is to convey the truth—al-haq. This sense of responsibility motivates us to share what is right."

3.4. Counselors employ comedy while addressing religious topics

Counselors sometimes use humor when discussing spiritual and religious matters to create a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. This approach aligns with Malay cultural norms, which emphasize maintaining dignity, avoiding conflict, and fostering harmonious relationships.

P12 shared an example of using humor to lighten the mood in a session: "In the first session, I said, 'Try to smile a bit. The sun is shining today, and it's a cheerful day. Just imagine Allah is watching us, and

it's nice to smile.' I used humor to make the conversation feel less serious."

Similarly, P10 described how humor helps ease clients into discussions about religious practices: "We incorporate humor by asking, 'Have you prayed enough?' It helps to make the conversation more approachable."

This study found that Malay cultural traditions influence how counselors communicate with clients. By using humor, counselors help clients feel more comfortable and reduce the seriousness of discussions about spiritual and religious topics while still conveying their intended message. These findings support previous research by Maros (2011), which highlights how Malay communication styles prioritize preserving a client's dignity and avoiding conflict to maintain harmonious relationships.

3.5. Counselors seek permission before addressing spiritual and religious issues

Counselors are cautious when discussing spiritual and religious matters and often seek permission from clients before exploring these topics further. This respectful approach aligns with Malay cultural communication norms, which prioritize politeness and sensitivity to avoid offending or distressing clients.

P4 explained this practice: "I ask permission before discussing spiritual and religious issues in more depth. After a few sessions, I gradually introduce these topics, ensuring the client feels comfortable. If they seem uneasy, I apologize and assure them that they can choose not to answer. Generally, clients respond positively, but I always respect their boundaries."

P11 follows a similar approach, apologizing before bringing up spiritual and religious elements in counseling. This reflects an awareness that such topics can be sensitive. Additionally, P11 emphasizes the importance of communication style, including tone of voice, intonation, and vocal emphasis, as discussed by Salhah (2017). Paying attention to these aspects helps ensure that conversations remain respectful and considerate. P11 stated, "When asking sensitive questions, we must be mindful of our tone of voice. Sometimes, after several sessions, when clients have shared a lot, we may introduce sensitive topics. It is important to apologize beforehand, as clients may feel uncomfortable. Observing their facial expressions helps us gauge their comfort level, especially when discussing topics like prayer practices."

Effective communication skills are essential for integrating spirituality and religion into counseling. These skills, developed through basic counseling training, are further shaped by cultural influences and the counselor's own spiritual and religious beliefs.

Malaysia is not unique in incorporating spiritual and religious elements into counseling. For example, in Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim country, counseling often integrates Islamic principles to

support clients' spiritual and emotional well-being. Similarly, in India, counselors incorporate Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious traditions to provide culturally relevant support (Nurhafiza et al., 2024).

In contrast, Western countries such as the United States emphasize multicultural counseling frameworks that include training in religious competence to support clients from diverse faith backgrounds (Scurry, 2024). These cross-cultural comparisons highlight both common challenges and unique opportunities. Malaysia's emphasis on respectful communication in religiously diverse settings aligns with international best practices (Yusop et al., 2023). However, while the United States has established formal guidelines, such as the American Counseling Association's Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling (ASERVIC), Malaysia could strengthen its counseling education by developing similar structured frameworks (Cashwell and Watts, 2010).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the data analysis uncovered six key themes that define how counselors integrate spirituality and religion into family counseling. Counselors exhibit sensitivity and awareness toward clients' spiritual and religious beliefs, aligning their communication with the client's perspectives. They use assertive communication when dealing with religious cases and strategically incorporate humor to facilitate religious discussion. Additionally, counselors seek permission before addressing spiritual or religious issues, ensuring a respectful and thoughtful approach. These findings underscore the importance of adapting communication to meet clients' spiritual and religious needs, building trust, and enhancing understanding in family counseling.

The ASERVIC guidelines for counselor competence in integrating spirituality and religion outline three key communication factors in counseling practice. These competencies include: i) counselors responding receptively and sensitively to spiritual and religious issues when interacting with clients; ii) counselors using spiritual and religious concepts that align with and are acceptable to the client's perspective; and iii) counselors recognizing and addressing spiritual and religious themes when clients require related therapeutic intervention. In addition to these ASERVIC communication factors, this study found that counselors also use assertive communication when assessing religious-related cases. They incorporate humor and seek permission before discussing spiritual and religious issues.

These findings highlight the influence of Malay culture and the counselors' spiritual and religious beliefs on their communication styles. Counselors demonstrate politeness and sensitivity, especially when addressing delicate spiritual and religious matters. However, as this study focused specifically on Malay Muslim counselors in Malaysia, a country rich in ethnic and religious diversity the findings may not fully capture the broader spectrum of

counselor communication practices. Future research should examine counseling communication across different cultural and religious contexts in Malaysia to address this gap. Such studies could enhance counselors' skills and knowledge while contributing valuable insights. This study underscores the universal significance of integrating spiritual and religious elements in counseling by connecting Malaysia's counseling approaches to global, cross-cultural contexts. Future research might also explore collaborative opportunities to establish global best practices, benefiting counselors and clients in diverse cultural and religious settings.

Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

Participants' well-being, autonomy, and confidentiality were prioritized throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained after participants were fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, with the option to withdraw at any time. Privacy and anonymity were safeguarded to prevent harm or breaches of trust, ensuring ethical integrity in all aspects of the research.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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